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Title: Farm Service Agency planning first round of office closures - Hancock, Muhlenberg offices scheduled to close in early 2008

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Lead:

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The Kentucky branch of the U.S. Farm Service Agency is moving ahead on plans to close 28 of its offices in Kentucky and will close the first set of offices this fall.

The federal Farm Service Agency has asked each state to submit plans to close some county FSA offices as part of an effort to improve efficiency.

Jeff Hall, director of the Kentucky Farm Service Agency, said public hearings on the first round of office closures were held in February. After the federal FSA office approves changes suggested after the hearings, the first eight Kentucky offices will begin closing in the fall, Hall said.

"If everything stays on track, we're looking at the middle of October" when the first county offices close, Hall said.

In the Owensboro region, FSA offices in Muhlenberg and Hancock counties are slated to close early next year.

"Daviess County is the most local place for it (the Hancock County office) to be combined with, but there are some producers who said they might go to Breckinridge County," Hall said. " ... They do have that option."

Farmers in Muhlenberg County will have the option of going to FSA offices in McLean and Hopkins counties, although the Muhlenberg office is being consolidated into the Butler County office.

Thirty-nine states have submitted plans to the Farm Service Agency office in Washington, D.C. The federal office first proposed closing about 700 offices nationwide in 2005 -- but the idea was abandoned after public and congressional opposition.

"Our agency was created back in the 1930s and 1940s," said Jim Meidinger, assistant to the

administrator in the federal FSA office. Although there have been changes over the years, the agency hasn't kept up with the times or technology.

"Transportation is different, farming is different, communication is different," Meidinger said. With telephones, fax machines and computers, many farmers no longer need to visit an FSA office to get service.

"There are other ways to conduct business with us," Meidinger said.

In Kentucky, the end of federal tobacco quotas and price supports also eliminated the need for many FSA offices.

"We're probably closing a bigger percentage (of offices) than other states," Hall said. The end of tobacco programs coupled with declines in the number of FSA staff members nationally.

"When you combine those two things, we've lost 80 employees over the last two years," Hall said. "We have five offices across the state where we don't have a full-time employee." Another 30 county offices have fewer than three employees, he said.

Money to hire new staff is probably not coming.

"It doesn't look too promising for any agency to get additional federal funding," Meidinger said.

Nationally, the Farm Service Agency also lost some of its workload, when the Environmental Quality Incentive Program was moved to the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

The plan to close the offices has been unpopular, Hall said.

"I haven't been to a meeting where somebody came up and said, 'This is a good idea,' " Hall said. "I understand taking an office out of a community is a loss ... We're at the point where, if we had the people, we could (keep the offices open). But we don't have the people."

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